DIGITAL ANARCHY: A GUIDEBOOK

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The dismantling and reimagining of digital interfaces and digital tools to stimulate and reshape our realities.

WHAT IS THIS SO-CALLED "DIGITAL ANARCHY"?

So, you picked up this book for some reason, right?

Let us first dissect. You may feel somewhat stuck (but this sounds cliché). Your title is "designer", but you could claim a few others. You are one who creates experiences and products in which people indulge. Yes, designer... Also, creator and communicator.

Whether this description suits you or not, you are in fact looking for a new way to imagine your professional and/or personal creative life. We are breaching into a macro-digital age, and we are beginning to understand what it means to digest the buildup of information around us. We have left the beloved Information Age, also known as the Digital Age, and we are learning how to reside in the new and improved Post-Digital era.

You may have heard of modern and post-modern or punk and post-punk. What differentiated these movements? Why were they named similarly but they were indeed different? What happened is that they were like brother and sister. The latter fed from the former to create something new and fresh, yet it was still maintaining a genre bound to the successes and failures of a time passed. Modern art and design as well as punk music still indeed exist and shed influence, and they owe their continued existence to their little siblings who carried their legacies forward with them.

By thinking about a system in a new way, you do not always suppress the thing or process in question (although sometimes you might need to). What you begin to do is create a process that works uniquely for you so that you are able to completely let go and express your creative impulses.

Anarchy might sound a bit harsh. Let us move away from that stigma and discuss what anarchist theory represents, understanding the

benefits of incorporating this mindset into our creative lives.

Anarchy is controversial. It is the theory and act of dismantling systems in order for new ones to emerge. Everyone believes and resides in a certain system. Anarchy does not take away these freedoms, but it encourages this movement to cater to individual needs. Freedom of choice is at its center.

Digital anarchy evaluates our current design systems and tools, emitting a critical and constructive light. This leaves room for change and also helps us as to not become too comfortable in a system which does not function properly. We must consistently ask ourselves what the impact of our work will have. By learning and practicing digital anarchy, each designer and user has the ability to create with their natural impulses and instincts in order to manage their unique digital residencies.

"For the anarchist, freedom is not an abstract philosophical concept, but the vital concrete possibility for every human being to bring to full development all the powers, capabilities, and talents with which nature has endowed him, and turn them to social account."

- Rudolf Rocker, anarchist historian [1]

WE KNOW THIS IS RELEVANT

Yes, we know that we must rethink.

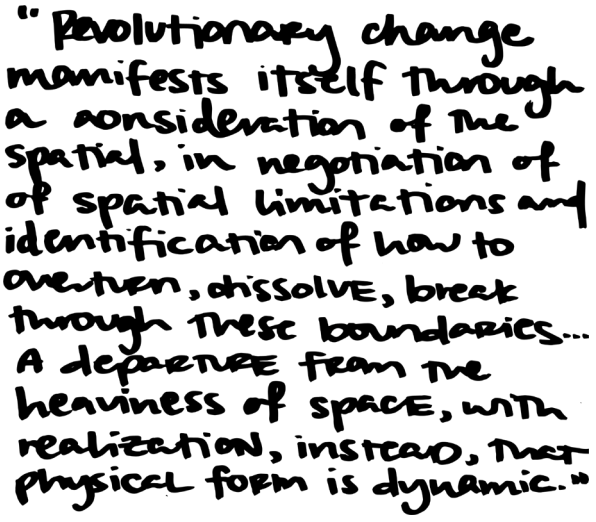
Since the dawn of 2020, our lives have been pushed even further into the digital realm. We spend a huge amount of time with our faces buried in white light (and changing to night-mode when it reaches 10:15 pm, as set by our automatic timer) to manage our professional, social, and private lives. Our presence online has become ever more encompassing, and maybe at times daunting. We do in fact lead an oftentimes large portion of our lives digitally.

We have begun to question what our new normals are; they are subjective and they consider our new need for physical distance and finding our new alternatives. To halt our lives is not an option; to stop our creative thinking is not either.

It is important to push forward into normalcy the act of stopping and questioning out intent when scrolling through the Internet or when reading through your daily tasks for work (while still in your pajamas), "what am I specifically doing or making here?" and "What are the impacts or intentions of my actions within the interface?"

It is becoming ever more pressing for us to become aware of our actions and decisions. If not, we run the risk of spiraling into creative redundancy. These cycles may work for a while but after some time, you might also find yourself in a confused state.

Sometimes, to basque in confusion is how you begin to practice digital anarchy. By stepping outside of our routines, methodologies, and habits, you are able to recognize different perspectives and build paths which lead you more intuitively to your desired product; your analog confusion hatches your digital anarchy.



- Legacy Russel[2]

WHERE TO BEGIN

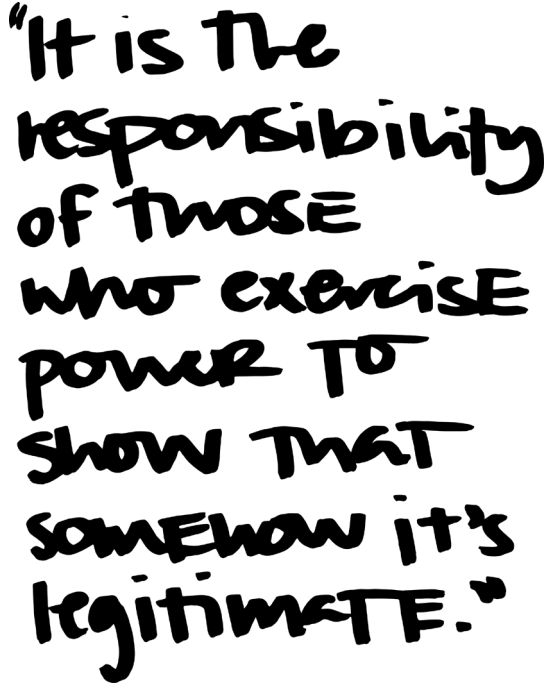
When beginning to try and understand the origins of your intent, you give yourself the opportunity for the inception of new ideas and new modes of creation. It is important to begin with sensing the impact that you would like to have individually of yourself, future users, and within communities.

Learning from others is valuable, but we can also look within ourselves for answers. Creative freedom of action and thought is a crucial aspect of practicing digital anarchy. We are not given freedom, we innately have freedom as individuals. We are not limited nor are we only seeing the shadows of others; we can see the big picture. We must embrace ourselves free from constraints by accepting and embracing the responsibilities of our actions.

Digital anarchy opposes exploitation. We have reached a point of certain abuse of various methodologies which do not function respectively for all designers or for every project, nor have we been completely satisfied with every product being made. What is the thing that is missing? Our individualities are missing. We are creating for masses in order to guarantee usage. We are noticing that the purely fashionable or profitable are beginning to push against our intuitive processes and oftentimes we go against our creative gut-feelings to avoid exploitation.

Digital anarchism is anti-authoritarian. Digital spaces can be space for self-expression. We can use anarchist framework to build worlds of exploration. There is structural inequality within the interface and it is growing for a certain audience and purpose. The wildness of human nature has been only permitted within regulations and prescribed spaces.[3]

We should appreciate imperfections for the sake of forward and outward movement. This promotes a path towards a new ideal, and in turn, towards digital anarchism.



- Noam Chomsky[4]

FAIL MORE, FAIL BETTER

A superb concept comes from consistent experimentation and failures. After countless prototypes, an ideal solution is formed.

Our nature is to solve problems. A role of a designer is to encourage usage by a creating a sense of ease and satisfaction; we must keep the user engaged.

We must also leave room for new concepts which are dysfunctional by the standard definition. We can use disconnections to identify where the new connections lie. Don Norman, the author of Design of Everyday Things explains, "We need to remove the word failure from our vocabulary... To fail is to learn: we learn more from our failures than from our successes".[5]

By embracing a free and experimental setting rather than dwelling on a precise outcome, we open ourselves to new ideas and solutions. Digital anarchy is the meditation on the individuality of our creative processes and this marks the beginning of grasping the particular creative measures which make it possible to eventuate a project or idea.

Digital anarchy is a practice of perfecting imperfection. Its goal is to break the (subjectively) longstanding and unworkable design systems and to influence the creation of a creative environment. It is a practice of constant replacement and the refreshment keeps us engaged; new ideas flow naturally without meeting dead end.

Digital anarchy begins with a story to be told. If we acknowledge our experiences as unique, we will be able draw our perspectives to share with others. The digital design community is longing for new struggles and triumphs to create new and resonating messages. This will move us forward into new questions and answers. We move away from seeking satisfaction or gratification. Risk taking and curiosity is why have created digital spaces and why we maintain a presence there, and this must be preserved.

FOR YOU AND FOR US

The anti-authoritarian spirit of digital anarchy brings about the practice of accountability for everyone maintaining or using given design systems. When we are devoted to responsibility, we maintain integrity. Individually, we are then able to look outside of ourselves and into the essence of our designs.

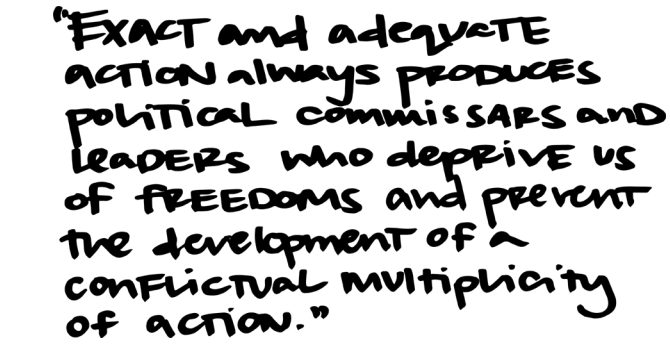
This gives birth to a creative, spontaneous, self-correcting form of action, which is essentially human. There grows an understanding of a new form of self-discipline, arising from creative integrity and awareness of biases.[6] We will be able to surround ourselves with authenticity. If we work within a defected system, we are slowly gravitating towards the corruption of values and a feeling of incompleteness.

In addition, by migrating away from broken patterns, we avoid transferring misinformation. Being anti-authoritarian and self-guiding, we reach our full potential as creatives and as human beings.

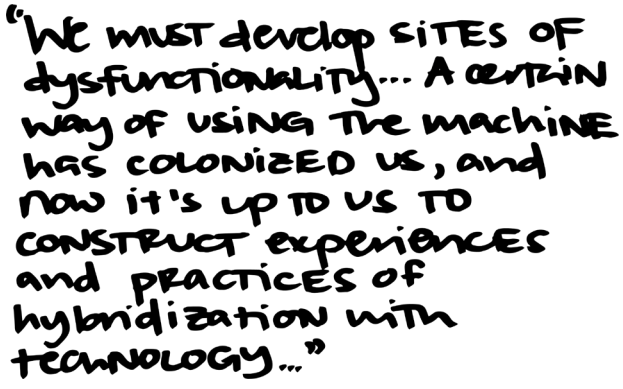
When we move with intention and our full creative integrity, we create opportunities for dialog and community building. Coming together with the ability to express ourselves is a strong act of virtue.

We are living in a time with a growing culture of inquiry and examination. Entire bookshelves in bookstores are dedicated to technology, its advances, its methodologies, its failures, and diverse propositions for future action. If we practice authenticity, our radical potential can be translated into a new world of expression, thus taking a stance against ideas by which we are unknowingly influenced. The tension of injecting something new within the interface and the failures that may come along is the key to structural change and movement towards a dynamic and productive endpoint.

Platforms which we tend to dwell within every day have become less of a community and more of a consumption-driven space with the use of algorithms, auto-generated content, and advertisements. As we bring liberated interfaces into community culture, it will bring people together once again in a dependable and forward-thinking manner. The interfaces will be used in ways which suit individual communities and propagate growth, without exploitation and authoritarian motives.



- Miguel Benasayag[7]



- Miguel Benasayag[8]

BABY STEPS

We start by working within the design structures or the interfaces with which we are familiar with or want we to expand from. From there, we dissect its structure and our tensions.

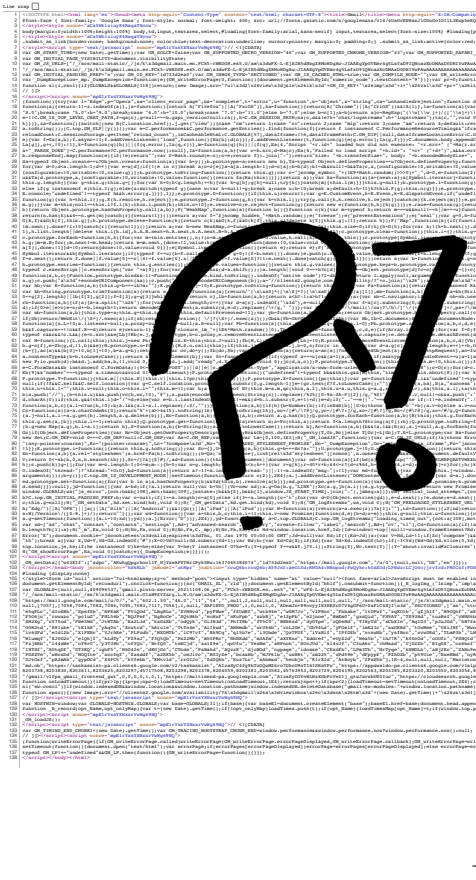
Designers take on projects. We are told, "This is the product; this is the audience, and these are the methods". These are presumed expectations.

Oppositely, we have projects in which we have only a few insights and we receive the opportunity to expand and enhance our processes. We want to explore and unravel. It is our job to command ourselves in the decision making process in order to guarantee our best results.

The feeling on which we want to meditate is when you perceive redundancy in substance or where there is lack of new concepts. You may not feel like you are using your full creative potential but instead following unsaid guidelines for approval. If we are able to cultivate an outlet in order to find our voice, in baby steps, our desired realities and achievements can become tangible.

As we rely more on algorithms, advertisements, and artificial intelligence, we must distinguish a machine's functionality from the intelligence of living beings. We contain intuitively creative processes which stimulate affectivity and error and this eventually translates into desire and a consciousness.[6] We contain the power for spontaneous action and abstract thinking, something a machine cannot predict.

By using our cognitive courage to take small steps towards a larger (perhaps ambiguous) goal, we can begin to create spaces of dysfunctionality which have the power to produce more space for larger concepts that expand or stimulate growth individually or carried to others.



- Code for Gmail[9]

LET'S DO THIS

Let us take an example to decode our theory.

Programming and code is the backing of every interface. Many designers and creatives ignore code. We tend to become overwhelmed with the small shapes and unclear messages. Designers are taught to strive towards clear communication (hence the saying, good design goes unnoticed). There is little room to work around the complexity and language of coding. There are various systems and versions of coding languages, made for creatives and programmers alike, but still apply the same visuality to their language translations.

Our first step is to dissect our tension. In this case scenario, we have addressed that the problem is visually-based: the code itself does not visually represent what may happen within the interface. At first glance, it is hard for the beginner to understand.

Even though we want to create a solution which is different, potentially helpful, but different than that which we began with, we should not let that pressure overwhelm our process of learning and experimenting.

To familiarize yourself with the faulty system's patterns, troubles, and inconveniences, you will have a sufficient grasp about what can be reevaluated. This will be the aid to start designing with a new, fresh approach. Once you begin to give attention to your individual struggles and creative patterns, you will be looking at this system in a digitally anarchistic fashion.

Do not worry about the outcome, because it will not be perfect from the start. The ideas in your head often translate different when written on paper or when put into practice. Create head space for change and mistakes. Regard these efforts as modest steps that have the potential to inspire.

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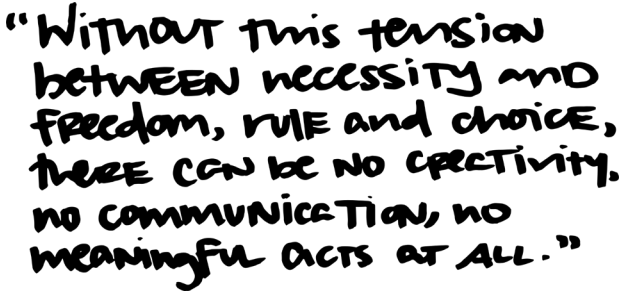
us to infuse our digital experiences into our lives away from the screen into an effective, responsible, and comprehensive existence.



- Noam Chomsky[11]

NOTES

1. Noam Chomsky, *On Anarchism*, The New Press, 2013, p. 2.

2. Legacy Russel, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, Verso, 2020, p. 84.

3. Legacy Russel, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, Verso, 2020, p. 23-26.

4. Noam Chomsky, *On Anarchism*, The New Press, 2013, p. 100.

5. Don Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things,* Basic Books, 2013, p. 64.

6. Noam Chomsky, *On Anarchism*, The New Press, 2013, p. 46-47.

7. Miguel Benasayag, *The Tyranny of Algorithms*, Europa Compass, p. 97.

8. Miguel Benasayag, *The Tyranny of Algorithms*, Europa Compass, p. 97

9. Gmail, *https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox,* Google Inc.

10. Steven Pressfield, *The War of Art,* Black Irish Entertainment LLC, p. 122

11. Noam Chomsky, *On Anarchism*, The New Press, 2013, p. 138.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Natalie Davis is an German-American artist and communication designer. She graduated from the University of Europe for Applied Sciences with a Bachelor of Arts in Communication Design in 2022. She continues to expand her portfolio and is dedicated to building concepts which are new and expressive.

This guidebook was written to help absolve redundancy and biases in design and creative processes as a whole. By anatomizing creative projects, methodologies, or systems where tensions occur, we lead to new discoveries and pathways for innovation.
By learning and practicing digital anarchy, we embrace individuality, intuition, integrity, responsibility, and virtue.

This approach on digital practices is based on a thesis written for the completion of bachelor studies in communication design.

Natalie Davis, 2022